

## Holiness and the Catholic University

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The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, S.T.D.  
Archbishop of San Antonio

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

The lives of the saints always fascinate me. There are so many different ways for people to express their friendship with Jesus. There are so many different ways to grow in holiness!

The canon of the Church's saints and blessed includes people from all walks of life. There are mystics, missionaries, martyrs, and heroic servants of the poor and oppressed.

But many of the Church's saints and blessed lived lives of extraordinary holiness in very ordinary settings—as mothers and fathers, husbands and wives; as doctors, philosophers, lawyers, politicians; as teachers and students.

One of my favorites is Blessed Salvador Huerta Gutiérrez. He ran an auto repair shop in Guadalajara, Mexico in the 1900s. They used to call him *Mago de Coches*, the “Magician of Cars.” I'm pretty sure Blessed Salvador is the only auto mechanic in the Church's canon of saints and blessed. But that's not because there is any inherent contradiction between being a mechanic or a business owner and being a saint. What we do for a living is an important pathway to holiness. That's one of the things I want to talk to you about today.

But first I want to mention two more people who the Church will beatify later this fall.

One is an Austrian, Franz Jägerstätter. After a very wild youth, he settled down and led a devout life. He was a simple farmer with a wife and three children and he was generous to his neighbors and the poor.

When the Nazis invaded Austria, they forced every man to enlist in Hitler's Army. Franz was one of the few who refused. He said a Catholic could never in good conscience do anything to help the Nazis. For that, the Nazis beheaded him in 1943.

Franz Jägerstätter once wrote this in a letter to his godchild: "I can say from my own experience how painful life often is when one lives as a halfway Christian. It is more like vegetating than living."

### *Halfway Christians*

This is my first point today, my brothers and sisters. We cannot live as "halfway Christians." We can't sit on the fence, or be lukewarm about our faith. God wants all of us. He doesn't just want a few minutes every day in prayer. Or an hour a week at Mass. He wants those things and much more. He wants all our love. Anything less than that is not really living. It's more like just existing.

Jesus told us that he came not only that we would have life, but that we would have life abundantly. In other words, he came to show us how to really live. To really live, he said, we have to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our *mind*. This last word is important, especially for those of you who are teachers, students, and school administrators. God wants you to love him with all your *mind*.

What does that mean? First it means that you can't separate your faith in Jesus from your work. You can't separate your faith in Jesus from your studies or your research. From your teaching or your administrative tasks.

St. Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed *by the renewal of your mind*, that you may prove what is the will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

That means we have to resist the patterns of thought that are out there in the world, in our culture. We can't be conformed to the world. Our culture almost forces us to lead a "double life" these days. We're told that faith is something private and personal, something we should keep to ourselves. We're told that our faith shouldn't have anything to do with how or why we work, or live, or make decisions.

That's just not true. It's a false teaching. God doesn't call us to be Christians one day a week or only in our "off-hours." Being a Christian is who we are. It's who we are meant to be. No government, no culture, no employer can force us to deny who we are.

I'm going to talk about these things more later. But my point is that being a Christian means we have to live and work *and think* in a different way. With a totally new orientation. We have to be always renewing our minds and letting God transform us into the people that he created us to be.

We have to make sure that we're always thinking about God's will and trying to do his will. God's will for us is very simply stated by St. Paul: "This is the will of God—your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3). God wants our sanctification. He wants us to be holy. That's his will for your life and for mine.

Now, before I talk about how we go about living a holy life, I want to mention one more new blessed. Antonio Rosmini. He'll be beatified in November. Rosmini was a teacher, a philosopher. He was also a man of courage and action, involved in the revolutionary struggles in Italy in the middle of the 19th century.

The books Rosmini wrote on philosophy and morals fill a big shelf. And he wrote about big themes. In fact, his project was to restore the human person, as a child of God, to the center of philosophy. He was convinced that philosophy and science had taken a dangerous and wrong turn in rejecting religion, in separating faith and reason.

He was an important philosopher, one of the finest in his field at the time. But that's not why he is being beatified. He's being beatified because he lived a holy life. Because he loved God with all his heart and mind. Because he practiced love in everything he did.

Rosmini was also a priest and an excellent spiritual writer. In a little book called *The Maxims of Christian Perfection* he wrote: "All Christians, all disciples of Jesus Christ, whatever may be their state and condition, are called to perfection. For all are called to the gospel, which is the law of perfection. . . . To all alike was said by our Divine Master, 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5:48)."

Rosmini was talking about the universal call to holiness. Holiness is the perfection of love. St. Thomas Aquinas used to say that something is perfect when it achieves the end for which it was created. The human person is created for one reason—to love. So, we are made perfect when we love. When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and when we love our neighbor as ourselves. That's what God wants from each one of us. There are no exceptions to this law of perfection. We're all called to holiness. To be saints.

### ***The Call To Be Saints***

That's my second point today, my friends. God wants us all to be saints. Sainthood is not a special exclusive category, something reserved for a select few. "Saint" is another word for Christian. In fact, before Christians were called Christians, they were called "saints." St. Paul used to address his letters this way—"To God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi" (Rom. 1:7; Phil. 1:1).

That's what we're here for. And that's what we're made for. We may not end up being saints who are recognized by the Church, like Franz Jägerstätter or Blessed Salvador Huerta. And make no mistake: there are far more uncanonized saints than there are canonized saints. Down through the ages, even into our own day, there are countless "saints" whose holiness is only known to their family members, their neighbors, their co-workers, and most

importantly, to God. I hope each of you will one day become one of those saints.

Okay. So far, we've established that your goal in life is to become saints, to be holy. How do we go about doing that? I have several practical suggestions for you to consider.

The first is this: You need to ponder the mystery of your life. Where did you come from? Where are you going? Why are you here? Do you really understand, in a deep and personal way, how much God loves you, and how he created each one of you for a special purpose?

It's true my friends! You must believe it. It is the secret of life. Scripture tells us that before the womb, God our Father knew us personally, by name (Jer. 1:5). "He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, to be holy. He destined us in love." St. Paul wrote those words to the Ephesians. And to us.

Before the foundation of the world, God had a plan for your life. That's why, in his first homily as pope, Benedict XVI said: "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary" (April 24, 2005).

### ***The Mission of this Life***

That's the first thing: Remember that you are here because God wants you to be here. You are willed by God, loved by God, and necessary. You are part of God's plan for the world. You may find it hard to believe, but it's nevertheless true: God has great expectations and plans for you.

I like to quote from the Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman. What he said, each of us can say: "God has committed some work to me which has not been committed to another. I have my mission—I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told of it in the next" (*Meditations on Christian Doctrine*).

That leads me to my second suggestion for your consideration: You must realize that your work, the job you do, is an important part of God's plan for your life. This is what Rosmini meant when he talked about our "state and condition" in life.

If God has given you the vocation to teach, or to manage and administer, or to study and learn—this is your pathway to holiness. You are to seek perfection, holiness, in the state of life that God has put you in.

You have to *sanctify* your work. You have to perform all your duties in such a way that you grow in holiness and your work somehow increases the love of God and the love of our neighbor.

Now, this is a foreign idea in our culture today. We have a very materialistic and "functionalist" notion of work. We look at work as only a means to an end. A way to make money. A way to get things done that need to be done. But in God's eyes, our work is something greater. Through our work, we become co-creators, participants in the divine plan.

What God asks of us in this life is that we make our work an expression of our faith. God wants us to make our work—everything we do—a kind of worship. An offering of love. A sacrifice and a prayer that we make to give thanks to him and to praise him.

St. Paul used to say: "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). No matter what you have to do in the day, no matter how small your chore, you can do it for the love and glory of God.

Blessed Mother Teresa, that great holy woman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said we should try to make everything we do "something beautiful for God."

You might be preparing a lecture. Or grading assignments that your students have turned in. Or working on a research article. Or studying. Do it all out of love. Ask God to accept your work as an offering in love. Ask him to use you and your work as an instrument through which his love and mercy can spread in the world.

That brings me to my third and final suggestion. St. Benedict used to have a rule for his monks. *Ora et labora*. Work and pray. You need to pray, my friends. This is the only way you can grow and deepen your friendship with Christ. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you're too busy to pray. Or that you'll start praying when things slow down a little in your life.

You have time right now. There are many little moments in the day when you can pray. Prayer is just talking to God, simply and honestly. Tell him about your successes and disappointments. The things you're worried about, or sorry about. The things you're hoping for. The things you'd like to do better next time.

Jesus taught us to ask God for things. Like little children talking to their Father—give us our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses. “Ask and you will receive,” Jesus said (John 16:24). Ask God to help you grow closer to him. Ask him to help you bring others closer to him through your work. When you've completed a task, remember to thank God for helping you.

I also encourage you to read a few verses of the gospel every day. Learn more about Jesus—about how he lived, about the things he said and the things he did. Go to meet him personally whenever you can—in the Eucharist and in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Finally, keep growing in your love for Christ's Church and in your knowledge of the Church's teachings, especially Catholic social teaching. Jesus said he would be with his Church until the end of time (Matt. 28:20). And St. Paul told us that Christ is united to the Church like a husband is united to his bride (Eph. 5). That means we can't ever separate Christ from his Church. When the Church speaks it speaks with the voice of Christ. “He who hears you hears me,” Jesus told his apostles (Luke 10:16).

Along with the Bible, I would urge you to read regularly from the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* and from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Through prayerful study, these books will help you think and act with the mind of Christ. They will

help you become more sensitive to what God is asking of you.

### *Catholic Identity and Academic Freedom*

Before I leave you, my friends, I want to talk about the special challenges you face in trying to live out your faith while working in a Catholic university. Sometimes these challenges are described in confrontational terms—as if there is a conflict between Catholic identity and academic freedom of speech. But I don't believe that's the most accurate way to understand the problem.

The challenges you face working in a Catholic academic environment are very similar to the challenges Catholics face in all walks of life in our culture today. The issue is the same: How do we stay true to our friendship with Christ in a culture that is aggressively secularized?

The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has described our culture as one of “exclusive humanism.” Taylor, by the way, is a kind of role model for Catholics in the academy. He is a devout Catholic who at the same time is recognized as one of the great philosophers of our time.

In his little book, *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor traces the roots of today's “exclusive humanism” back to the aftermath of the wars of religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the wake of those wars, Enlightenment thinkers came to regard religious passions as irrational and as the chief cause of tensions within and between nations. They decided that organized religion and Church doctrine were the true obstacles to human freedom and human development.

Through various means, they worked to exclude all talk of God, faith, and religious values from public life. Instead they oriented society to focus solely on what Taylor calls “human flourishing.” Human flourishing means that only this world matters, and that our only legitimate goals should be related to making this world a better place for our brothers and sisters.

Of course, these are noble goals. We all want people to flourish and be happy. The problem is that exclusive humanism defines happiness and human flourishing in radically individualistic and secular terms. It cuts off part of human nature, that part of human nature that yearns for transcendence, for God.

Today, exclusive humanism has resulted in practical atheism becoming the *de facto* state religion of America. More and more, in order to live in our society, to participate in its economic and political life, you are required to conduct yourself as if God does not exist.

This is a great challenge and temptation to all Catholics in every profession. But it's a deeper problem in colleges and universities, where exclusive humanism has led to an artificial and dangerous divorce of faith and reason. Just like you can't talk about religious values in the wider society, on campus you can't talk about religion or Church teaching when discussing intellectual or scientific issues in the sciences or the humanities.

Again in this divorce of faith and reason we see a false distortion, a "truncating" of the human person. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *On Faith and Reason*, said: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." That's a beautiful saying. It reflects a deep Catholic belief. That we are creatures of body and soul, spirit and flesh. That God made us with minds that can reason and hearts that can believe.

God made us with an-inborn passion and desire for the truth. We are "hard-wired" you might say, to seek the truth about who we are, about the world we live in, and about God. We can only discover these truths through our use of *both* reason *and* faith.

Faith in the truths revealed by Jesus—in Scripture and in the teachings of his Church—is its own special kind of knowledge. Faith gives us access to truths we could never learn by our own rational powers. Truths of the Spirit that come to us as a gift from God. These truths can't be proven in a lab. But they are as true as the structure of the genetic code or the laws of physics.

When you separate faith and reason, you end up with tyranny—the cruel domination of the weak by the strong. When you separate faith and reason, the human person and the common good are lost and forgotten. It happened in Nazi Germany, in Soviet Russia, and, unfortunately, we have evidence of it in our own country today.

Let me give you just one example that has been in the news a lot. Stem-cell research. In universities and private labs, medical researchers are creating human embryos in order to destroy them and harvest their “stem cells.” Now, these researchers’ goals are noble, reasonable, and they seem like humanitarians. They want to cure disease. Save lives. Improve the quality of life for those who are suffering.

But because these researchers are operating by reason alone, without regard to the truths and insights of faith, their research can only result in tyranny. They wind up destroying the weak and defenseless in order to save the strong. Without the eyes of faith, the human embryo is just a group of cells, a mass of biological matter. Only faith in the truth revealed by Jesus teaches us that the human person is made a child of God with God-given dignity and rights.

### ***Heroes of the Faith***

Reason is a great gift from God. But reason alone can’t give meaning to our lives. Reason alone can find “no reason” to defend the weak, the unborn or the human embryo. Reason alone can find no reason, no value in a person born with disabilities. And reason alone can find no reason, no purpose, no dignity in human suffering. That’s why it’s so dangerous to divorce reason from faith.

Remember, my friends, it was academic philosophers and medical school graduates, backed up by the highly educated members of the U.S. Supreme Court, who justified and carried out the sterilization of mentally handicapped persons at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is academic philosophers and medical school graduates, again backed by

the Supreme Court, who justify and carry out abortions and stem-cell research today. These same persons are pushing us down a slippery slope toward euthanasia for the elderly and infanticide for babies born with severe handicaps.

That's why the mission of the Catholic university is so crucial. The Catholic university today must be at the vanguard of the reconciliation of faith and reason. The Catholic university today must be the leader in exploring and defending the beauty, the mystery, and the truth of the human person.

My friends, I urge you—in your studies, in your research, in your teaching—stay faithful to Jesus Christ and the truths he teaches through his Church. This is the sure path to your own holiness. And it is an essential dimension of your calling as Catholic scholars, teachers and students.

There is more to this world than just what we can discover through reason and science. We all know this in our hearts. We profess in the creed that we believe that God is the maker of things “seen and unseen.” In the Catholic university, especially, our academic research and teaching should reflect this.

Earlier I quoted a letter from the soon-to-be Blessed Franz Jägerstätter. Now, in that same letter to his godson, he said: “Since the death of Christ, almost every century has seen the persecution of Christians. There have always been heroes and martyrs who gave their lives—often in horrible ways—for Christ and their faith. If we hope to reach our goal some day, then we, too, must become heroes of the faith.”

We have talked about many things in this hour, my friends. But that is the one message I want to leave you with. Our goal is heaven. It begins here on earth. In our striving for holiness. In our striving to be saints.

You are about to begin a new school year, full of promise and hope. Make it your goal, in everything you do, to be heroes of the faith. Like Franz Jägerstätter. Like Antonio Rosmini. Like the countless women and men who have gone before you in the communion of saints.

It is a beautiful calling to be a saint. And God never asks us to do impossible things. It's the opposite. With God all things are possible. Stay close to Jesus and his Church. He will give you the power, the grace to do the things God asks of us.

Thank for this opportunity to talk to you today.

I pray that Mary, Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, watch over and guide you in this new academic year.